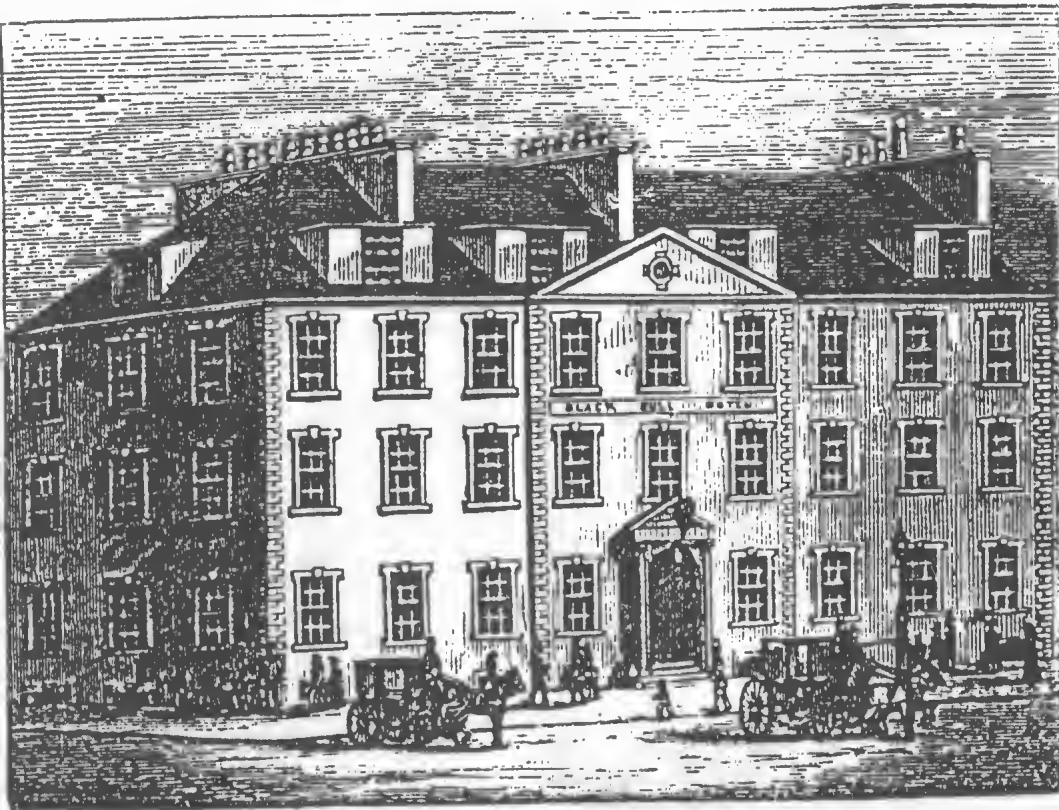


# ROBERT BURNS IN GLASGOW



*The Black Bull Inn, Argyle Street.*

by  
**FREDDY ANDERSON**



*"Death and Dr. Hornbrook". An illustration based on the satire by Burns on the Glasgow man, John Wilson. (Drawn by J. Buckley).*

9. Bridgeton, Glasgow, had the largest Burns Club in the world.

10. The ordinary man in the street (and woman too) subscribed to have Burns's statue erected in George Square.

### *History of the Black Bull Inn*

Built in 1759, the same year as Robert Burns was born, it and The Saracen Head in Gallowgate were the two most famous inns in Glasgow from the 18th well into the 19th century. It was owned by the Highland Society, a prominent member of which was James Finlay, father of the notorious Kirkman Finlay, Tory M.P. and Lord Provost of Glasgow, who employed the provocateur Richmond, on behalf of Lords Sidmouth and Castlereagh. This Government conspiracy was responsible for the hanging of three weavers and the deportation of many others.

The Black Bull Inn was situated on the north side of Argyll Street, at the <sup>west</sup> corner of the present Glassford Street, James Graham, vintner, was its first landlord. He succeeded in 1766 by George Harrison who established a 'Fly on Springs' to run thrice a week to Edinburgh. A man named Heron followed him in 1768. In Burns's time, it seemed to be a George Durie who leased the Inn. In 1806, part of the Inn was sub-let as shops. In 1849, the whole building was converted into a warehouse owned by Mann, Simpson & Byars. On the site of the Black Bull Inn, the present Marks & Spencers stores were erected.

## ROBERT BURNS IN NO MEAN CITY

### *Glasgow in 1787*

In 1987, two hundred years will have passed since Robert Burns made his first recorded visit to Glasgow. In the year 1787, the city had only a population of approximately 60,000, and the area north and north-west of George Square consisted of lanes and meadows, where cattle and sheep belonging to the townsfolk grazed peacefully. The Clyde was then a clear shallow stream abounding in salmon and trout. No large boats could reach the quay at the Broomielaw; Port Glasgow, as its name implies, served the city as a port for its many imports and exports. The Trongate was Glasgow's main street: a grand, broad thoroughfare, lined with attractive buildings like the Tontine Hotel, Assembly Rooms, the Council House, the Tron Church, etc., with quaint piazzas enhancing the scene. This part of Glasgow made the widely travelled Englishman, Daniel Defoe, declare earlier in the century that the pleasant vista seen from Glasgow Cross compared favourably with the best of its kind in not only England, but all Europe. Even in Burns's day, the Trongate had not lost the beauty described by Defoe.

### *The 'Black Bull' Inn*

The large 'Black Bull Inn' had been erected in that street (facing the Stockwell) in 1759, the same year in which Burns was born, and it was in this hotel that Burns resided on at least two of his five known visits to Glasgow. One of his letters to Nancy McElhose ('Clarinda') was written with a fine spirit of jovial delight from the 'Black Bull Inn' the same day as he met, by previous arrangement, his worldly-wise friend and mentor of Irvine days, the worthy sea captain Richard Brown. Burns described that evening the Glasgow hotel as one of the happiest occasions in his life.

### *Ayrshire Friends in Glasgow*

In 1787, the poet was by no means a stranger to the people of Glasgow. An article about his poetry had appeared in 'The Mercury', a local newspaper, and although it was highly critical of Burns's attitude to 'things sacred', it had to concede that the Ayrshire poet had considerable talent. Today, one can smile at such gross underestimation of genius, but it must have been galling for a unique young poet whose continued existence in Scotland depended on the sale of his poems. Thanks to the good people of Glasgow, no less than Edinburgh, Paisley, Kilmarnock and Ayr, Burns was saved from emigration to the West Indies. More than a hundred subscriptions to the Edinburgh Edition came from folk living in the vicinity of Glasgow Cross. The famous bookshop, John Smith & Sons, then in its infancy just

off the Trongate, stocked copies, no doubt encouraged by the praises of Dr. Moore who had visited his home town in 1786.

In addition, Burns had several Ayrshire friends domiciled in Glasgow in the years of his five visits, 1787 and 1788. Three of these friends were especially dear to him as the existing letters from the poet to them prove. To David Bryce, a shoemaker in the Saltmarket, Burns revealed minute details of the anguish he felt at the treatment he had received from the Armour family in 1786. He also promised to visit Bryce when in Glasgow. Another of his correspondents was James Candlish, a Mauchline school friend, who was then attending the Old College in High Street. In a letter to Peter Hill, Edinburgh, Burns says: "Candlish, the earliest friend, except my only brother, that I have on earth, and one of the worthiest fellows that ever any man called by the name of friend – if a luncheon of my cheese would help to rid him of his super-abundant modesty, you would do well to give it to him." The poet's third great Ayrshire friend in Glasgow was also a very worthy man called Robert McIndoe, who owned a draper's shop in Horn's Land in Virginia Street. In 1787, following the success of the Edinburgh Edition, Burns visited McIndoe's shop and bought gifts for his mother and sisters. In 1788, he made the most famous purchase of all – several yards of 'lusterine silk' that went into the making of Jean Armour's wedding dress!

### *'The Bonny Lass of Ballochmyle'*

It was only in the decade preceding Burns's arrival in Glasgow that George Square was planned for residences, small hotels, academies and offices. Up to that period, it had been a mere swamp, off the Cow Loan, and used by the townsfolk as a midden. The new George Square, as photographs taken before the Municipal Buildings were erected at the end of the 19th century prove, transformed the scene. In the east side of the Square, where the solid, grandiose City Chambers now stand., the Alexander family, wealthy merchants from Renfrewshire, had their town residence. In 1786, Claude Alexander became a major share-holder in the cotton mills of Catrine, Ayrshire, and bought as a country home the adjacent large estate of Ballochmyle. The previous owner, Sir John Whitefoord, who was Burns's patron and friend, had been forced to sell Ballochmyle through the failure of the Bank of Ayr.

In the Summer when the Alexanders had taken over their grand estate, Burns was meandering by the winding banks of the river Ayr within the grounds of Ballochmyle when he passed Claude's sister, Wilhelmina, just recently arrived from Glasgow. An azure sky, enchanting scenery and a pretty lass made the rich ingredients of a love-song, "The Bonny Lass O' Ballochmyle", even though Burns had not exchanged the time of day with its fair inspirer. It was several months later, November 1786, that he sent Miss Alexander the lovely lyric with a letter of dedication. To his great disappointment, she did not even deign to acknowledge the receipt of either. A possible explanation is that Wilhelmina, for all her prettiness, had neither the charm nor the culture of a Nancy McElhose or a Mrs. Dunlop, and

Thomson and his brother sang one or two songs written by Burns. The small original photograph of Betty Burns in her old age which Hugh MacDonald had taken was published in his book, and a copy is in the Rare Books department of the Mitchell Library, Glasgow.

Jean Armour wrote often to Betty Burns and sent her what little gifts she could afford. Betty lived with her family in Pollokshaws for almost fifty years. Her memorial headstone is in the Old Vennel Burial Grounds in that district.

### *Conclusion*

These are the main Burnsian connections with the city of Glasgow. For years, both local historians and biographers of the great poet have been telling the public that Burns had little or no time for Glasgow and scarcely any connection with the city. It is difficult to ascribe such statements to anything other than ignorance of the real facts. Throughout the hundred and ninety years since the death of Burns in 1796, thousands of Ayrshire people were forced by the upheaval of the Industrial Revolution to seek a livelihood away from the land. Glasgow, the nearest big city to Ayr, Kilmarnock, etc., became a settling place for many of them. These immigrants brought with them the warmth and wit of the Burns Country, and who can doubt but that is the richest ingredient of the Glasgow character today.

### *Burns and Glasgow (Additional Burnsiana)*

1. The Mitchell Library, Glasgow, has the largest and best collection of Burns literature in the world.
2. The poet's eldest son, Robert, attended Glasgow University.
3. John Mayne from whose 'Logan Braes' Burns created the song 'Logan Water', lived beside Glasgow Green. He also wrote 'Hallowe'en' before Burns wrote his version.
4. The following men who knew Burns well were at the Old College in High Street: 'Daddy' Auld, Professor Walker, Dr. McGill, Dr. Dalrymple, John Wilson, James Candlish.
5. Burns got the tune 'Duncan Gray' from a Glasgow street carter.
6. 'The Jolly Beggars' was first published in Glasgow.
7. Glasgow has published more editions of Burns's poems than any other city or town.
8. Samuel Marshak, who made the works of Burns known to millions in the Soviet Union, met Lord Finuary (Dr. McLeod) and the poet, Hugh MacDiarmid, in Iona House, Clyde St., Glasgow, in 1953.

opened a small grocery shop in Tarbolton, but was foolish enough to think he could prescribe medicines in addition for his customers.

In 1785, as Gilbert Burns described it, Robert Burns attended a mason-meeting in Tarbolton, when the Dominie made a too ostentatious display of his 'medical skill'. As he parted in the evening from this mixture of pedantry and physic, at the place where he describes his meeting with 'Death', one of those floating ideas of apparitions mentioned in his famous letter to Dr. Moore crossed his mind; this set him to work for the rest of the way home. Hornbrook itself was a child's primer then in common use at the schools. In the satire, Dr. Hornbrook is supposed to have met the grim figure of Death at night in a lonely lane in Ayrshire. He upbraids the quack for robbing him of victims, but as the satire continues Death in a merry mood thanks Hornbrook for the scores of people killed by his stupid prescriptions.

John Wilson, not long after the parish of Tarbolton rocked with laughter, returned to what might seem the great anonymity of late 18th and early 19th century Glasgow. His conduct there, however, was no great conversion to sanctity, even though he held the post of Session of Clerk to the Chapel of Ease in the Gorbals for many decades. He was in trouble once for charging young married couples three times for the reading out the wedding bans on one Sunday only, and on another occasion he came into public notice by signing a petition against Maynooth College in Ireland receiving a Government grant for the training of priests. John Wilson outlived not only the poet who mocked his medical pretensions, but three wives. A dumpy figure of a man dressed from head to foot in a sombre black, he was a kenspeckle character of the South side of Glasgow. He was buried in the Old Gorbals burial grounds, which a few years ago was converted into a recreation field. His memorial stone, however, still exists at the wall.

### *Betty Burns of Pollokshaws*

Of the many Glasgow connections with Robert Burns, the Pollokshaws one is the most unique. Betty Burns, natural daughter of the poet, lived in Dumfries for many years following her father's death. Jean Armour and Betty got on exceptionally well together. Both of them sang beautifully, and among their admiring audience one day was a young Glasgow soldier stationed in Dumfries, John Thomson, a weaver from Pollokshaws. A year later John and Betty got married and eventually settled down. Mrs. Thomson was a great favourite in the South side of Glasgow and was known to everyone as 'Betty Burns'.

Hugh MacDonald, the well-known Glasgow journalist, writing a book, "Rambles Around Glasgow", about the year 1854, visited Betty Burns and her family in Pollokshaws. He stated in his book that it was generally conceded by everyone who had seen Burns or the best paintings of him that no-one in the whole family resembled the poet so much as the dark-eyed lass in Pollokshaws. Her son, Robert Burns Thomson, bore a remarkable resemblance to his grandfather also, and not only that but wrote poetry of quite a good standard. On the great Centenary Celebrations of Robert Burns's birthday held in Glasgow, 1859, R. B.

fearing Burns's disappointment in her lack of these, wisely decided to allow the poet to retain the first idyllic impressions of her.

There is no doubt that she cherished the poem and the letter, and the house in George Square became a kind of shrine where Glasgow's privileged belles of early Victorian years could have a peep at the framed masterpiece, the proud possession of a lonely spinster. She out-lived the man who immortalised her by forty-four years and during her lifetime a leafy grotto was erected in the grounds of Ballochmyle in memory of a unique July day in 1786.

### *Dr. John Moore*

Dr. Moore, whose residence for many years lay in the north side of the Trongate, was by far Burns's most important male correspondent. The longest and best letter that the poet ever wrote was his rich autobiographical epistle of the 2nd August, 1787. Dr. Moore, its recipient, had moved to London some years before, but several letters on various interesting subjects passed between them. Moore was a grandson of John Anderson, Lord Provost of Glasgow, and laird of Dowhill, an estate which extended from the present Duke Street down to the Gallowgate. The family memorial plaque is embedded in the east wall of Glasgow Cathedral cemetery.

For a time, Moore ran a joint medical practice in Glasgow with the famous Professor of Anatomy, Dr. Hamilton, but Dr. Moore quit the partnership to devote himself to literature. He became quite a successful, popular writer, talented to a degree, but with no spark of the great genius of his friend. He is remembered as the father of the more famous Sir John Moore of Corunna, but much more importantly as the intimate correspondent who received detailed information from the great poet himself on his early life. Subsequent biographers of Burns are in debt to Dr. Moore for their knowledge of the poet, confirmed by his younger brother, Gilbert, at this early and sometimes obscure period of the Bard's life. The plaque on the wall of the site in Trongate should commemorate this important fact.

Dr. Moore was introduced into correspondence with Burns in January 1787, and several letters passed between them, despite the fact that they held quite strong literary and political differences. Moore, for example, wrongly advised Burns to 'perfect' himself in the English language in order to obtain 'wider publication', an advice which Burns quite sensibly ignored. The 'literary doctor' died in London 1802. Dr. Curie, Burns's first biographer, used the famous letter in his introduction to the poet's Collected Works.

### *From Dumfries to Glasgow*

The Bard's closest friend during those five last years of his illness at Dumfries was immediate Superior in rank in the Customs and Excise, Alexander Findlater, a man for whom Burns had both a great respect and liking. Findlater is mentioned in the poet's letters, and in addition to an affectionate couplet addressed to his friend, the



lively balled, "The De'il's Awa Wi' the Excise Man" is said to have been written for the latter's amusement. The senior Customs officer at Dumfries was no ordinary civil servant. Descended from a brave ancestry who had sacrificed their lives for the forlorn cause of Mary Queen of Scots in Edinburgh, Findlater was a man of considerable culture, with a special love for music. Burns presented him with the Scottish Airs to which he, the poet, had contributed so much, and when Findlater was promoted to the top position of Collector of Excise in Glasgow a year or so after the poet's untimely death, he had an organ installed in his large house in Sauchiehall Street. The site of Findlater's residence in Glasgow is at the corner of Wellington Street, where the La Scala Picture House now stands.

When the 'holy Willies' and folk of that ilk were launching their cowardly posthumous attacks on the character of Burns, it is to Findlater's credit that he warmly defended his friend. He was so close to Burns, that Jean Armour being in confinement during the poet's last illness, it was Findlater administered the sips of water to the parched lips of Burns on that fatal night. The poet's friend lived in Glasgow for almost forty years after his sojourn in Dumfries. He lived to a ripe old age. He was buried in North Street cemetery in Anderston, Glasgow, where in 1923 the Sandyford Burns Club had a headstone erected in memory of him. It bore a noble testimony to the man who was,

"Burns's friend in life – his vindicator after death"

## *"Ae Fond Kiss"*

Nancy McElhose, or 'Clarinda' on whom Burns wrote one of his greatest love lyrics, "Ae Fond Kiss", is generally associated with Edinburgh where she met the poet. Nancy, however, was born and bred in the Saltmarket, Glasgow, the daughter of Dr. Craig, a surgeon both in the Town Hospital and the Merchant's House. Their tenement flat near Glasgow Cross was hospital property. Before a series of tragedies struck the unfortunate Nancy with the early deaths of her father, mother and older sister whom she loved, followed by an unhappy marriage to a bully, McElhose, who deserted her and their children, Nancy lived halycon days in that picturesque part of Glasgow that aroused Defoe's admiration. Nancy Craig was a charming, vivacious and intelligent girl who enjoyed playing 'Merry-ma-tanzie' and similar innocent street games in and out of the quaint piazzas with other children of the Saltmarket on Summer days in 1760's and early 1770's. In later years, she would remember with nostalgia walks taken with her chaperon along the lovely serpentine walks of Glasgow Green, close to the clear wimplan' waters of the bonny Clyde. Her pretty looks had already won the approval of the town gallants. Dr. John Moore was still in Glasgow in those years, and when he founded the famous 'Hodge Podge' Club which met once a month in one of the taverns near the Cross, Nancy's cousin, the later Lord Craig, nominated his niece as one of the Club belles. With her charm and looks she was, of course, readily accepted.

After a marriage fiasco and the emigration of McElhose to an administrative post in Jamaica, Nancy, probably dependent on Lord Craig's generosity, settled

adjacent to him in Edinburgh. She was twenty-three years old at the time. About five years later she met Robert Burns at the height of his fame in that 'Athens of the North'. Jean Armour and her parents had repudiated her 'marriage' vows, leaving, it would seem, Burns free to indulge in a somewhat more than Platonic friendship with Nancy. She seldom returned to Glasgow; the city had mostly sad memories for her. Burns, on one occasion at least, acted as messenger for her in the city. He collected a parcel for her from Brash & Reid's shop at Glasgow Cross. He also wrote a jovial letter to her from the Black Bull Inn at 9pm Monday evening, 17th February 1788, the same day that he met his Irvine friend, Captain Brown, in Glasgow. All told, Burns wrote at least twenty-five letters to Nancy, as well as many songs and poems, to all of which she warmly, if at times cautiously, responded. After all, both her grandfathers and her uncle were strict kirk ministers. She also outlived Burns by about forty years and to her latest hour spoke fondly of her 'Sylvander'.

## *Charles Tennant*

In the early days of the Burns family in Ayrshire, the poet's father had no better than friend than Mr. Tennant (Senior), 'Auld Glenconner'. The latter was Burns's godfather at Alloway, and later when it came to choosing a farm in 1788, Burns took advice from the Tennants. Charles, who was a younger son of this family, entered the weaving trade and leaving home appears to have prospered fairly well in the Renfrewshire village of Kilbarchan. In his rhyming epistle to Glenconner, Burns mentions 'Wabster Charlie' and the latter's good fortune. About this time (the 1780s), Charles Tennant branched off into the bleaching side of the weaving industry and became so successful that in conjunction with the MacIntosh family of Dunchattan in the east of Glasgow, he began the chemical works, which became known to the world as St. Rollox.

The huge chimney of St. Rollox towered over the High Street, Glasgow, for almost a century, a landmark of the largest chemical works in Europe of its day. Charles Tennant and his family lived in a Georgian mansion near Blytheswood Square. He was a shy, retiring sort of man, who refused a Knighthood and supported the great Reform Movement of the early 19th century. He founded an industrial dynasty, but one of his great delights was to tell his family and friends anecdotes of Robert Burns and early days in old Ayrshire. A statue is erected over the grave of 'Wabster Charlie' in the Necropolis off High Street.

## *Dr. Hornbook*

The hero of 'Death and Dr. Hornbrook', one of Burns's best satires, was the Glasgow-born schoolmaster, John Wilson. He was educated for a brief period at the Old College in High Street, and when Burns met him he was a teacher in the small village of Tarbolton in Ayrshire. To eke out a meagre livelihood Wilson